

ABSTRACT

Environmental conservation in many parts of the world presents a daunting task owing to factors like population increase. In Kenya, for example, environmental degradation has occurred at an alarming rate in areas such as the Mau Forest, the home of the majority of the Ogiek people. Traditionally, the Ogiek are hunter-gatherers and have distinctive histories of interaction with the natural environment. But, they have been gradually rendered homeless through appropriation of parts of the Mau Forest for other uses since the colonial periods. Over the years, the Ogiek have inhabited the Mau Forest with little impact on the environment. However, encroachment on the Ogiek habitat by the farming communities and timber harvesting companies has presented a serious threat to the existence of this group, whose approach to environmental conservation has continually satisfied their basic needs. This study thus sought to establish whether there is a relationship between indigenous education and environmental conservation among the pre-colonial Ogiek of Mau Forest. The study also sought to determine the impact of various aspects of modernization on Ogiek environmental conservation strategies from 1895 to 1992. The study was informed by the General Systems Theory and the Cultural Ecology Theory. An ethno-historical approach was employed in the design, instrumentation, data collection, analysis and interpretation. To achieve systematic collection of data, purposive sampling techniques were used. The research sample was drawn from seven sites in the Mau Forest, namely; Teret, Sururu, Nessuit, Mariashoni, Bararget, Tinet and Kiptororo. Fifty six (56) members of the Ogiek community, mainly cultural consultants, were interviewed for the study. The main instruments for data collection were observation and interview schedules as well as a variety of documentary sources. The information obtained from the various sources was checked for validity and reliability using triangulation as well as external and internal criticism approaches to data analysis. The results of the study revealed that there was a clear link between Ogiek indigenous education and environmental conservation. It was noted in the discussion that the traditional Ogiek were specialists in hunting, bee-keeping and herbal medicine. They also had unusual sensitivity to their forests and the creatures which inhabited them. The Ogiek's familiarity and awareness of the balance between themselves and nature as evidenced by the complex socio-political and economic superstructures made them to be peaceful and happy as they co-existed with plants and wildlife in the forest. Furthermore, the results of this study emphasized that the colonial and post colonial governments did not recognize the role of the Ogiek as 'guardians' and 'custodians' of the Mau Forest ecosystem. Because of this, the Ogiek have continuously resented government's externally engineered policies on environmental conservation as these have led to their marginalization and near extinction. It was arguably asserted that the resentment of these ecological policies were not because they were unsuitable to the local conditions, but invariably viewed as an imposition on the local community by the governing authority without any proper and adequate consultation by all the interested parties. The study recommends that dialogue should be promoted among the various organizations, groups and communities involved in the conservation of the Mau Forest in order to achieve the set objectives with regards to resource management and conservation. Finally, the study observes that to arrive at consensus on these issues, a more concrete, acceptable and broad-based bottom-up participatory approach should be employed. Further research needs to focus its attention on the actual process of integrating the two epistemes under study with a view to improving them and adapting the same to suit the current emerging trends in environmental education. More specifically, emphasis should be made to harmonize theory and practice of environmental education, conservation and management strategies.